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ABSTRACT

Many research studies have used samples of women in introductory psychology courses, but few studies have focused on women interested in careers in psychology. To compare women who aspire to careers in psychology with those aspiring to other professions, 428 women in their senior year at seven colleges completed questionnaires assessing career goals and values, family background, self-esteem, self-concept, and stress variables. Women aspiring to careers and doctoral degrees in psychology were compared to those aspiring to other professional careers as well as to undecided students. The number of women planning on a doctoral degree in psychology was quite small. While they did not differ greatly from other students in demographic and family background, these women tended to be more altruistic and reported greater stress in intimate relationships. Future psychologists consistently emphasized interpersonal relationships in their values, self-concepts, and worries. While the implications of these findings must be interpreted cautiously due to the small sample of future psychologists, the results suggest directions for future research on the values and process of vocational choice for women. (Author/JAC)

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Seven College Study

Radcliffe College

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Self-Perceived Abilities, Values, and Stresses of Future Female Psychologists

Diana M. Zuckerman

During the last decade, college-educated women have applied to doctoral programs and professional schools in record numbers. At some colleges, careers in medicine, law, and other male-dominated fields have replaced teaching and other traditional careers as women's most popular career choices.

The Seven College Study is a longitudinal research project that is designed to assess the changing goals of women at seven very selective liberal arts colleges in the Northeast. Five of these colleges are women's colleges and two are co-educational. Traditionally, these seven schools have produced a disproportionately large number of alumnae who have attained graduate/professional degrees. Currently, more than half the women enrolled in these schools aspire to doctorates or professional degrees.

A great deal of research has made use of samples of women in Introductory Psychology courses, but very few studies have focused on women who are interested in careers in psychology. The present paper will focus on women who are attracted to the field, and assess how they differ from capable college students who aspire to other careers. This paper compares women who aspire to careers in psychology with those aspiring to other professions, in terms of demographic and family background, career motivations, self-concepts and self-esteem, and experiences with stress.

METHOD

Sample and Procedure

Questionnaires were mailed to a sample of 1200 women from the Class of 1981 at seven very selective liberal arts colleges. Questionnaires were mailed in February 1981 and were completed during the next two months, the second semester of their senior year. Students who did not complete the questionnaire were urged to do so in follow-up letters, phone calls, or personal reminders by dormitory counselors. The response rate was 67%.

For this paper, the sample will be restricted to the 428 women who comprised the following categories: students aspiring to careers and doctoral degrees in psychology (N=24), to careers in business (N=99), to careers in writing/communications (N=85), and to careers in science (N=38); students who plan to attain doctorates in other fields (N=99), students who majored in psychology or sociology who aspire to careers in law (N=24) or medicine (N=25); and students who were completely undecided about a career (N=38).

Questionnaires

The questionnaires, which took approximately 30 minutes to complete, focused on life goals, demographic and family background, career motivations, experiences and responses to stress, self-esteem, and self-concept. The questionnaires also included questions concerning college activities and attitudes towards college, which will not be discussed in this paper.

Goals. Goals were assessed by: 1) a multiple choice question regarding the highest educational goal that the woman planned to attain, and 2) an open-ended question regarding the career she would like to pursue.

Demographic and family background. This was assessed in terms of age, race, marital status, religious upbringing, birth order, number of siblings, type of high school attended (coed vs. single sex; public vs. private), parents' countries of origin, parents' educational attainment and occupations, mother's employment status (homemaker vs. work force) when the respondent was growing up, and parents' current marital status.

Career values. These were assessed by 17 items regarding the importance of materialistic, altruistic, and other considerations when selecting a career. Each item was rated on a four-point scale ranging from "not important" to "essential." The items were factor analyzed and four factors emerged: helping (the opportunity to help others, work with people, work for social change, and express one's own values); prestige/security (high income, status, secure and stable future, and the availability of jobs); challenge/autonomy (intellectual challenge, freedom from supervision, and the opportunity to be creative and to exercise initiative); and fewer demands (low pressure and stress, reasonable working hours, and flexibility of time schedule).

Stress. The Areas of Stress scale, a modified version of Makosky's scale (Belle, 1982), asked the students to assess how stressful each of the following had been during the last month: school work, family, intimate relationships, friends, living conditions, money, physical health, and mental health. Students rated each on a ten-point scale or stated that the area was "not applicable" to their situation.

Responses to stress were assessed by the Habits of Nervous Tension Scale (Thomas, 1971), which consists of a check list of 26 possible reactions to stress. This scale can be assessed in terms of three factors that represent stress reaction patterns: depression, anxiety, and anger.

Self-esteem and self-concept. Self-acceptance was assessed by the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (1965). The Rosenberg Scale consists of ten statements, to which the student responds on a four-point scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree."

Interpersonal self-confidence was assessed by the Texas Social

Behavior Inventory (Helmreich and Stapp, 1974). This inventory consists of 16 statements, to which the student responds on a five-point scale ranging from "very characteristic of me" to "not at all characteristic of me."

Self-concept was assessed by 23 items pertaining to abilities and personality traits. Students responded on five-point scales ranging from "among the highest 10%" at their school to "among the lowest 10%" at their school. When factor analyzed, these items produced eight factors: achieving (persevering and driven to achieve); artistic/creative (artistic ability and originality); attractive (physically attractive and popular with men); friendly (cheerful, understanding, and popular with women); independent (self-sufficient and able to cope with stress); leadership/public speaking ability; math/science ability; and scholarly (intellectual curiosity and academic ability).

Data Analysis

Because of the small sample of future psychologists and very uneven sample sizes, multivariate statistical methods were not useful. Therefore, contingency table analysis and t tests were used to compare future psychologists with either specific career groups or with the combined sample of women with other career goals.

RESULTS

Demographic and Family Background

According to the data on parents' educational attainment, the sample has a relatively high socio-economic status: more than half of the fathers and almost one-third of the mothers have graduate degrees. Virtually all of the students are single; 86% are white, 5% are Oriental, and 5% are black. Most describe their religious background as Protestant (46%) or Catholic (27%); 17% are Jewish and 12% report no religious upbringing. Almost one-fourth have at least one foreign born parent. Two-thirds have mothers who are currently employed, and 75% report that their mothers were employed while they were growing up.

The women who aspire to careers in psychology do not significantly differ from their classmates on any of the demographic and family background variables assessed except birth order: the future psychologists are less likely to be last born (13% compared to 32% for their classmates: $\chi^2 = 4.16$, $p < .05$). This difference is accounted for by the larger proportion of middle borns among future psychologists (46%, compared to 27%).

Career Values

Most of the students express considerable interest in finding a career that is interesting and intellectually challenging, and where they

can help people, work with people, and express their creativity and ethical standards. High income, status, low stress work environments, and shorter training requirements are much less important to them.

However, the women who aspire to careers in psychology describe their career motivations differently from other students. Compared to most of their classmates, future psychologists are more motivated by the desire to be helpful. They rate the helping motivations as significantly more important than students who aspire to careers in business ($p < .0001$), science ($p < .0001$), writing/communications ($p < .001$), and other doctoral level fields ($p < .001$), as well as the students who are undecided about a career ($p < .001$). They rate the prestige/security motivations as marginally more important than students aspiring to doctorates in other fields ($p < .09$) and significantly less important than do students aspiring to careers in business ($p < .01$). Future psychologists do not differ significantly from their classmates on the nondemanding job factor or the challenge/autonomy factor.

Stress

Most of the students report moderate or high stress in the areas assessed. Future psychologists are highest of all career groups on reported stress in intimate relationships; their score of 6.9 (on a scale from 1-10) is significantly higher than future businesswomen (5.7, $p < .05$) and writers (5.5, $p < .05$), and marginally higher than future scientists (5.4, $p < .07$) and women aspiring to doctorates in other fields (5.7, $p < .06$). They report moderate stress related to schoolwork (6.5). This is not as high as future lawyers (8.0, $p < .025$), but is comparable to students aspiring to doctorates in other fields (7.3), future scientists (6.5), businesswomen (6.4), physicians (6.3), and undecideds (6.6).

On the Habits of Nervous Tension Scale, future psychologists report somewhat different responses to stress, compared to their classmates. They are higher on the anxiety subscale than future physicians ($p < .01$) or future businesswomen ($p < .06$).

Self-Concept and Self-Esteem

The women who aspire to careers in psychology do not differ from other students in terms of self-acceptance, as assessed by the Rosenberg Scale, or interpersonal self-confidence, as assessed by the Texas Social Behavior Inventory. However, they do differ in their self descriptions. Future psychologists are highest of all career groups on the friendly factor (cheerful, popular with women, and high in understanding of others); they are significantly higher on this factor than students aspiring to doctorates in other fields ($p < .05$), future scientists ($p < .001$). and students who are undecided about their career goals ($p < .01$), and marginally higher than future lawyers ($p < .08$).

They rate themselves significantly lower on math and science ability than the future physicians ($p < .001$), and significantly lower on leadership/public speaking ability than future businesswomen ($p < .02$) and future lawyers ($p < .05$). Future psychologists rate themselves similarly to their classmates on the five other self-concept factors (achieving; artistic/creative; attractive; scholarly; and self-sufficient/able to cope with stress).

DISCUSSION

The number of women who aspire to careers in psychology in this sample was unexpectedly small, given that a large proportion of students major in psychology at the seven colleges involved in the study. The sample of 1200 students who received questionnaires was stratified to include a large group of premedical students; however, even of the non-premedical students in the sample, only 3% aspire to degrees in psychology.

This small sample is both of methodological concern and of concern to those who care about the future of women in psychology. In terms of methodology, the small sample is inappropriate for multivariate statistical comparisons, making it necessary to use contingency table analyses and t tests, and to interpret the results with caution. As for the field of psychology, the small number of women in this group suggests that able young women from these colleges are not especially attracted to careers in psychology. Of the approximately 3% of the women in our sample who hope to enter the field, some will probably not be accepted into graduate programs and others will not finish their graduate degrees. Some women interested in other careers may later decide to enter psychology graduate programs; however, the number of alumnae from these schools who will become psychologists will probably be even smaller than this sample suggests. We do not know whether or not the small number of women from these colleges who aspire to careers in psychology reflects a national trend. However, these colleges are of particular importance because three of the seven schools ranked in the top 10 (and six ranked in the top 25) in terms of the numbers and percentage of alumnae who obtained doctorates in the Social Sciences between 1920-1973 (Tidball and Kistiakowsky, 1976).

Of course, the apparent declining interest in psychology among these alumnae may reflect changes in the kinds of students these schools attract. It could also be seen as an appropriate response to the scarcity of jobs in the field. However, it is a trend that we will want to watch carefully, since it may eventually result in fewer women in the field.

The results indicate that future psychologists do not differ greatly from their classmates in terms of demographic and family background and on most of the other variables assessed. However, the women who aspire

to careers in psychology are more altruistic/people-oriented and report somewhat greater concerns with stress in their intimate relationships. Compared to most of their classmates, they describe themselves as more cheerful, understanding, and popular with women. They also report lower math and science ability than premedical students, and lower leadership and public speaking ability than future businesswomen and lawyers. Compared to future physicians and businesswomen, future psychologists are more likely to report that they respond to stress with anxiety, which may reflect stronger anxiety reactions or greater awareness of anxiety.

Although future psychologists and their classmates share many similar traits, values, and interests, there is a consistent pattern indicating that future psychologists tend to emphasize interpersonal relationships in their values, self-concepts, and worries. In these respects they are quite similar to students majoring in the social sciences who aspire to medical or law careers, and consistently different from students aspiring to science careers or doctorates in other fields. Despite the difficulty of gaining acceptance into psychology graduate programs, the problems they will face in the tight job market, and/or the stresses they will experience in clinical practice, future psychologists do not see themselves as especially academically gifted, self-sufficient, or able to cope with stress. However, it is important to remember that the women who aspire to careers in psychology are being compared to women who tend to aspire to other high status professions.

Overall, it is discouraging that so few women aspire to careers in psychology, but encouraging that the women who want to be psychologists report more altruistic values and a more positive self-concept in terms of their abilities to interact well with others. It is also important that in most respects they are not noticeably more psychologically distressed than their classmates with other career goals, in contrast to some of the negative stereotypes of psychologists.

The implications of these findings must by interpreted cautiously, due to the relatively small sample of future psychologists, and the very selective colleges involved in the study. If the sample of future psychologists had been sufficiently large, it would also have been preferable to control for the significant differences in birth order when making statistical comparisons between future psychologists and other career groups. However, the results of the current study suggest directions for future research on the values and process of vocational choice of women who aspire to careers in psychology. These issues will be addressed when we analyze the longitudinal data being collected by the Seven College Study.

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